

Hollywood Soldiers

Story and Photos by SPC Neil C. Jones

“ACTION” ...

The rain continued to fall, deepening shadows across the graveyard and completing the somber mood characterized by those gathered for the funeral. The bare trees resembled gnarled black hands against the gray sky.

SFC Mickey McBride, bearing a folded American flag, took one step forward, and his heels made an audible click as he brought them together. 2LT Sean Edwards carefully received the flag from McBride and moved toward the “widow.” Soldiers standing at attention on either side of the casket

SPC Neil C. Jones works for the Fort Lee Public Affairs Office.

turned and marched silently away.

Edwards passed the flag to the weeping actress, his voice soft and respectful. Then he stood straight and rendered a final salute.

The director yelled, “cut,” and the actors in the funeral scene broke character. Crying women began to smile and laugh; the men, whose faces had been sober masks, were suddenly animated.

But the squad that had walked off camera still stood at attention, in two-column formation. They didn’t break character, because they weren’t actors.

These soldiers from Fort Lee, Va., had been asked to appear in a motion picture, to add realism to a fictional

portrayal of a military funeral.

Directed by Scott Hicks, the Castle Rock Entertainment film titled “Hearts in Atlantis” is loosely based on Stephen King’s 1999 novel.

Scheduled to be released this fall, the movie tells the story of a young boy in the 1960s who befriends a mysterious man played by actor Anthony Hopkins.

“The movie is much more ‘Stand by Me’ or ‘The Green Mile’ than ‘The Shining’ or ‘Carrie,’” said producer Michael Flynn. “It has a supernatural air, but it’s not horror. It’s more suspenseful.”

Set in Connecticut, the scene in which the Fort Lee soldiers partici-



Fort Lee soldiers stand at attention waiting to begin a funeral scene shot at Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond, Va.



Director Scott Hicks instructs a cameraman to focus on SFC Mickey McBride, whose image appears on a nearby monitor.

pated takes place 40 years later, after the boy has grown up.

Fort Lee garrison soldiers served as a flag detail, and the 109th Quartermaster Company provided a rifle team to perform the three-volley funeral salute.

Because they had speaking lines in the film, McBride and Edwards will have their names in the credits at the end of the film.

Also, Fort Lee band trumpeter SPC Keith Beyer will receive a credit line for playing "Taps" during the filmed ceremony.

The soldiers were chosen for their roles because of the realism they could bring to the movie.

"It gives the scene more credibility," said Flynn.

Using real soldiers also helps the Army guarantee the accurate portrayal of service members by Hollywood filmmakers.

"It shows how we are," said MAJ Andy Ortegon, Department of Defense project officer with the Office of the Chief of Public Affairs' Los Angeles branch.

"If we don't come out and show them how we do the job, they'll create the action, and a lot of times, it's not the actual way we would do it," Ortegon said. "So we help them to make a better product, and we help

ourselves by portraying soldiers the way we are."

Actor Terry Beaver said he thought the soldiers were actors until he spoke to one of them.

"I assumed at first that they were extras and they were just wearing uniforms," he said. "It wasn't until I asked one of them, 'Aren't you cold?' and he said, 'No, we're Army.' Then I realized they were for real.



Academy Award-winning actor Anthony Hopkins stars in the film, which tells the story of a young boy in the 1960s who befriends a mysterious man.

"I should have known, though. They were standing at attention so well, for so long," he said.

He pointed to one of the soldiers standing in the freezing rain.

The man stood tall in his Class A uniform, seemingly unmoved by the weather.

"Look at the way soldiers stand," Beaver said. "The posture has a certain dignity and strength."

An actor can imitate this unyielding professionalism, he said, but the realism offered by soldiers is obvious.

"You can put a person in a cop's uniform and have them direct traffic," he said, "but there's something about somebody who really does it that offers that slight edge of authenticity."

Despite the fabrication of the event, the soldiers handled themselves as though honoring a real service member.

Despite the cameras, despite the recreation of a gravesite, despite the falseness of emotion from the mourners, the soldiers were true to life, putting into the performance the same dedication to excellence they would show if the event were genuine.

Hollywood could have hired actors for the parts, but though they may have been able to perform the actions, they would never be able to fill the uniform with the body and soul of a soldier. □



Hicks explains a scene to actor David Morse, who has appeared in two earlier film adaptations of Stephen King novels.



Assistant director Jeffrey Wetzel (at left) and Hicks arrange members of the 109th Quartermaster Company rifle team for the next scene.